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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the interest by academic popular culture scholars in the films of the American slapstick comedy group of the 1930s and 1940s, "The Three Stooges." Noting that between 1990 and 1995 at least 17 scholarly articles have been presented at various popular culture association meetings, the paper touches upon the universal and particular themes that "Stooge scholars" have discussed in their works--especially those focusing on the Stooges' debt to Italian "Commedia dell' Arte" and to the satirical genre, as well as discussions of the Stooges contribution to World War II propaganda films. The paper cites as areas of major academic research on "The Three Stooges": (1) philosophical approaches to the Stooges; (2) analyses of the Stooges' contributions to film propaganda; (3) examination of the roles of Blacks and women in Stooge comedies; and (4) study of the Stooges' role in providing a morale booster for Americans during the "Great Depression." The paper also cites other miscellaneous studies of "The Three Stooges" and calls for suggestions to expand the interest area within the Popular Culture Association. (NKA)

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THE THREE STOOGES IN 'ACADEME': A SUMMARY/REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH

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THE THREE STOOGES IN 'ACADEME': A SYNTHESIS OF RECENT RESEARCH

Introduction

The original intent of this paper was to synthesize academic research completed on The Three Stooges during the past five years during which the interest area has existed within the Popular Culture Association. Following initial efforts to locate the papers presented in that time frame, a less ambitious task of a "review/summary" of research seemed more appropriate. After locating some findings of early papers and including this year's offerings, a true synthesis will be forthcoming.

During the years 1990-1995, at least seventeen papers by nine authors have been presented at Popular Culture Association conferences. One paper was presented at the Midwest Popular Culture Association conference in Indianapolis in 1992, and one article has appeared in a scholarly journal.

Records of papers presented do not appear to be complete and copies of some research are not readily available. What follows is a chronological summary of Stooges academic research and as much information on the research as was available at this time.

Research Chronology

1990 TORONTO

The premiere academic conference panel devoted solely to The Three Stooges occurred in Toronto at the 1990 meeting of the Popular Culture Association. Jon Solomon, Department of Classics at the University of Arizona, served as area head and developed the program.

Joan Howard Maurer, Moe Howard's daughter, was a special panel guest and gave a presentation entitled, "The Popularity of The Three Stooges in the Eighties." In addition to developing the program, Jon Solomon presented the results of his research, "From Depression to Suburbia in The Three Stooges Shorts." Jon's brother, Robert Solomon, Department of Philosophy at the University of Texas in Austin, presented a paper titled, "The Three Stooges and the Onto-theological Illusion of Presence."

Two additional academicians had papers accepted for the Toronto conference. David Paul Pace, Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Arizona, reported on "Playing the

Dozens in Spike Lee's Reification of The Three Stooges." Phlip Hemenway, Director of Honors at Butte College in California, presented the restults of his work titled, "Larry, Moe, Curly: Three Good Reasons for an Equal Rights Amendment."

Later Stooge scholars, including myself, are greatly indebted to Jon Solomon for his frontrunning efforts in establishing the Stooges interest area within the Popular Culture Association.

1991 SAN ANTONIO

Two papers and another appearance by Joan Howard Maurer marked the second Popular Culture Association conference featuring a Three Stooges' sesssion. Area head chair, Jon Solomon, moderated the panel which consisted of two papers and Joan's presentation.

Kathleen Chamberlain, Department of English at Emory and Henry College, compared the Stooges to Italian Renaissance comedy in her paper, "The Three Stooges and the 'Commedia dell' Arte." She found that the Stooges, like the "zanni" of the commedia, represented the common man. "When they (Stooges) find themselves in social situations that threaten to overwhelm the common man, they respond the only way they can and still survive--they give "society" a pie in the eye and a kick in the pants." Chamberlain concluded:

> As in the "commedia," most of the satire validates the ordinary person's perspective. Through the Stooges, we can see pretension punctured, dignity dumped, and the upper-class upended. The Three Stooges create a delightfully zany chaos that reminds us that total Stooge-like anarchy is never far below the surface of anything we might choose to call "civilization." We may think we're dignified and in control, but like Curly, we're all just "victims of soicumstance."

Don Morlan, Department of Communication at the University of Dayton, presented "An Analysis of The Three Stooges' Contributions to World War II Propaganda: Dictator Moe Hailstone, et. al." Morlan posited that the Stooges made a significant and uniquely trendsetting contribution to World War II film propaganda. A total of eight comedies dealt with war themes; however, six of those were released after America's entry into World War II--at a time when such films were common and not controversial. He concluded:

> . . . .two of their comedies--YOU NAZTY SPY and I'LL NEVER HEIL AGAIN--might be considered classics in American film propagandizing. Classic, first, in the sense that both comedies portrayed very "pure" propaganda which bashed a world threatening ideology; secondly, the Stooges were

> getting away with 'murder' at a time when the rest of the film industry was being called to task for even portraying American military life in a positive light.

1992 LOUISVILLE

There was no Three Stooges' panel in Louisville; however, one paper was presented as part of the World War II film offerings. Don Morlan expanded on his 1991 paper in "The Three Stooges' Contribution to WWII Propaganda: Moe Hailstone and Adenoid Hynkel's Race to the Screen."

An undeniable conclusion from the results of the investigation was that Moe Howard was the first screen personality to satirize Adolf Hitler and the Nazi ideology. The vehicle portraying Hitler and Nazism, YOU NAZTY SPY, was being seen in theaters across the country nine months prior to the premiere of Charles Chaplin's classic, THE GREAT DICTATOR. The fact holds special significance to the student of World War II era comedy propaganda. It should also be a significant revelation for all film historians.

1993 NEW ORLEANS

1993 saw Abbott and Costello included with the Stooges in a paper by Don Morlan entitled, "Slapstick Comedy Contributions to Pre-WWII Film Propaganda: The Three Stooges and Abbott and Costello." Combining the two comedy teams was a result of a paper presented by Morlan in October, 1992, at the Midwest Popular Culture Association conference in Indianapolis. Morlan stated in New Orleans:

> A clear conclusion of this research is that The Three Stooges' two-reeler, YOU NAZTY SPY, and Abbott and Costello's first starring feature, BUCK PRIVATES, deserve the status of classics in the history of World War II American film propaganda. The Stooges' offering was the first film to satirize Hitler and Nazism and Moe Howard was the first American film personality to ridicule Hitler--nearly two years prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Abbott and Costello's BUCK PRIVATES was the first film to present the peace time draft issue to the American public and the first to glamourize military life.

Three additional papers were presented in New Orleans. Jon Solomon analyzed "Narrative Technique in The Three Stooges' Films." Robert Solomon expanded on his earlier philosophical offering in "Are The Three Stooges Funny? Soitenly!" Jon Herman, Department of Religious Studies at St. Lawrence

University, was the first to examine music in the Stooges' shorts in his paper titled, "Swing It! Musical Catharsis in the Columbia Shorts."

Lyla Fine Budnick, Larry Fine's sister, and her husband, Nate, Stooges' sound technician and road manager in the 1960's, were guests on the program--much to the delight of those attending. Lyla reminisced about her life as sibling to the "Stooge in the middle." Nate described what life was like travelling with the Stooges later in their careers.

1994 CHICAGO

1994 was a very significant year for The Three Stooges interest area in the Popular Culture Association. Under the leadership of Jon Solomon, program offerings were expanded to two sessions for the first time. Two new Stooge scholars surfaced with very worthy contributions.

Peter Seely, Department of Literature and Communication at Illinois Benedictine College, presented results of his research on "The Image of the Negro in The Three Stooges' Shorts." Seely used Lawrence Reddick's 19 sub-categories for Negro portrayals developed in 1944.

Seely found that the portrayal of the Negro in The Three Stooges' comedies was slightly less negative than what was the norm in motion pictures at the time. He concluded:

> This situation may have been different had the Stooges made full-length features during their period of greatest popularity, where a Negro would have gotten more time on the screen. One can only speculate, but given the track record, the portrayal would most likely have been more negative. The short nature of the Stooges' film essentially meant that the full depths of the Negro stereotypes, as personified by Mantan Moreland and Willie Best, were not able to be fully explored.

Jason Danielian, Homewood, IL, applied Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme analysis to selected Stooge shorts in an effort to examine the theme, American justice, as an American institution. Danielian used four comedies to demonstrate how the Stooges' presented a counter-balance to, or polarization of, the theme. He concluded:

> . . . .The Three Stooges cleverly and subversively both undermine the "American Justice" fantasy theme and validate, indeed become champions of, the school of critical legal theory and analysis.

Don Morlan investigated the Stooges contribution to uplifting the morale of Americans during the great depression in his paper, "A Pie in the Face: The Three Stooges' Anti-Aristocracy Theme in Depression-Era American Film." He summarized:

> The role of the motion picture in attempting to equalize the social classes during the depression was significant and clearly documented. Hollywood was successful at challenging the values of the wealthy and equally adept at neutralizing the differences in the classes and allowing the common man to rule the day. The contributions of slapstick comedy--particularly The Three Stooges--have been summarily ignored by film and 20th century popular culture historians. The Stooges ridiculed both the rich as people and their values in at least 34 of the 190 Columbia shorts. Moe, Larry, and Curly were major players in Hollywood's effort to uplift America's morale in the economic crisis of the great depression.

Once again, in Chicago, Lyla and Nate Budnick appeared on the panel to relate personal anecdotes and experiences with the Stooges.

1995 PHILADELPHIA

Now to the present! 1995 has seen repeat appearances of both Jason Danielian and Peter Seely, as well as a very welcome return by Kathleen Chamberlain.

One of the questions I most often receive from members of the public and the press concerning the "boys" is--Why do women dislike The Three Stooges? I am pleased that at this conference a woman who very obviously DOES NOT dislike the Stooges has initiated an investigation which might provide some preliminary answers to that question. Chamberlain previewed her paper, "The Biggest Thing of Their Lives: The Three Stooges and Women," in an abstract for this conference:

> As with all characters in The Three Stooges' films, women are never fully realized individuals. They serve as foils, as butts of jokes, as plot instruments, and as comedic types. Because much of the Stooges' humor derives from the contrast between the upper and lower classes, women frequently appear as stereotyped society dowagers or giddy rich girls who serve a function similar to that of Margaret Dumont in the Marx Brothers' comedies. Other common types are the damsel in distress and the scheming con artist. Since women always remain mysterious

> and even frightening to the Stooges, their presence helps emphasize the boys' position as oddballs who are never fully a part of the real world.

The purpose of Jason Danielian's paper, "Songs in the Key of Moe: Music, Melody, and Mayhem in The Three Stooges," is to examine the multitude of Stooges' short subjects in which music is used as a comic medium. His examination considered the following: The Three Stooges' clever utilization of props (musical instruments); The Stooges' dramatic role-playing (as musicians); and, their application of multi-talented skills in the short subjects (as vocalists, of sorts). Based on excerpts from seventeen Stooge comedies, Danielian concluded:

> These short subjects, alone, demonstrate the comical genius of The Three Stooges. Their brilliant portrayal of musicians in these short subjects demonstrates their limitless resource of characters and comedic passages. However, The Three Stooges created 190 short subjects in which they portrayed every personality, profession, and predicament imagineable. Therein lay the genius of The Three Stooges.

Peter Seely acknowledges that the Stooges have been best known throughout their history for their famous slapstick: the pie fights, the eye gouges, and the face slaps. The attention of Stooge critics has also focused on the visual slapstick antics of the Stooges. While some critics have expressed concerns regarding the use of grammar and locution, those same critics have failed to acknowledge the clever use of language in the Stooge comedies.

Seely proposed the methodology and hypothesis of his study, "Casting Asparagus, Tunis Sandwiches, and 'Moidering' the King's English: Puns, Plays-on-Words and Malapropisms in Three Stooges' Dialogue:"

> The methodology employed in this study will be a content analysis of the 190 Stooge's shorts produced between 1934 and 1957. Every line of dialogue from these episodes will be evaluated to see which fit into the aforementioned categories. The analysis will be mostly qualitative (though quantitative measures may prove useful in the comparison of the incidence of these categories). This comprehensive examination should provide an indicator of the tendencies of the writers (and the Stooges themselves) toward the use of dialogue as a comedic device in these short films.

For the second consecutive year two Stooge panels were scheduled for the current conference. Academic papers made up the first session. In the second session, immediately following the first, Lyla and Nate Budnick will return for a third

consecutive appearance. The Budnicks are joined by Frank Reighter, Director of the annual Three Stooges' Convention, and Gary Lassin, President of the Three Stooges Fan Club. Frank Reighter will discuss "A Weekend with 1000 Knuckleheads: The Annual Three Stooges' Convention," and Gary Lassin's presentation will focus on "The Three Stooges Fan Club and Journal: A View from the Top."

Presentation of research at the past five Popular Culture Association conferences has resulted in one scholarly publication on the Stooges. STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE, the official publication of the Popular Culture Association in the South, published Don Morlan's article, "Slapstick Contributions to WWII Propaganda: The Three Stooges and Abbott and Costello," in it's October, 1994, issue. The article was an expansion of Morlan's 1993 paper in New Orleans.

An article also authored by Morlan, is currently in press with REMEMBER MAGAZINE, a nationally circulated nostalgia publication, and will appear in the upcoming June-July issue.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Academic research relating to The Three Stooges during the past five years is impressive both in quantity and quality. Not surprisingly, all the research has been reported within the structure of the Popular Culture Association or organizations affiliated with that group.

Five thematic categories are identifiable in which more than one effort has been conducted. Two philosophical approaches to the Stooges have been completed; one providing a philosophical analysis of the shorts and another providing answers to the question, Are the Three Stooges funny?

A second area of major research is found in analyses of the Stooges' contributions to film propaganda prior to and during World War II. All eight Stooge comedies dealing with war themes have been noted; Moe Howard has been established as the first film comedian to portray and satirize Adolph Hitler; and, a comparison of Stooge propaganda to contributions of Abbott and Costello has been completed. The clear conclusion of all such research is that the Stooges were major contributors to pre-WWII film propaganda and that those contributions have been generally ignored by film historians.

Three additional social/political themes have been the subject of research. The role of the Negro in Three Stooges' comedies was found to be less negative than in full length features of the period, and a preliminary investigation concerning the role of women in Stooge comedies was initiated. Finally, the Stooges were found to have contributed significantly to uplifting the morale of Americans during the great depression.

Two papers, one a content analysis and the other descriptive, treated special uses of language in the two-reelers and provided an analysis of the narrative technique in Three Stooges' films. Two additional papers analyzed the Stooges' use of music by examining musical catharsis and the Stooges as musicians.

An early presentation provided a historical development of The Three Stooge comedies. Another paper compared the Stooge comedies to the Italian Renaissance comedic form of the "commedia dell' arte." A third offering examined selected Stooge comedies in assessing the Stooges VS the American criminal justice system. Finally, an analysis of the Stooges in relation to the Equal Rights Amendment has been completed and Spike Lee's Reification of The Three Stooges has undergone study.

It is unlikely that any other slapstick comic or team of the 30's and 40's has received as much attention from the academy as The Three Stooges. The intense and annual interest coming from the American and Canadian presses in what we are doing is testimony to the realism that academicians are not just "talking to each other" as we are often accused of doing. The general public is highly interested in what we do.

Where do we go from here? Are there other fertile thematic areas in Three Stooges' comedies to be developed? We have identified a loyal core of academicians committed to Stooge research; however, our numbers are small. How do we attract more scholars? Should we expand the interest area within the Popular Culture Association to inlcude other slapstick comics in film history?

The questions are easy to formulate. I turn to you to assist me with the answers.

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